

Testimony of Betty Huskins**Vice President – Public Affairs & Corporate Development, AdvantageWest North Carolina**

United States House of Representatives Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands

Regarding HB 4530, Blue Ridge Heritage and Cultural Partnership, North Carolina
10:00 a.m., June 13, 2002
1334 Longworth House Office Building

Mr. Chairman, I am Betty Huskins, vice president of AdvantageWest—a public/private regional commission in the mountains of North Carolina. I'm pleased to testify today on behalf of AdvantageWest and all of our partners who work diligently to preserve and celebrate our heritage.

Much of my life's work has been in tourism within our region, and I've watched as national and international interest in the culture, heritage and landscape of the North Carolina mountains has grown in volume and stature. From 1995 – 2000, we saw the economic impact of tourism in our region increase an impressive 23 percent, to a total of \$1.7 billion, not including the revenue from the Cherokee Indian Reservation, as gauged by Tourism Industry of America. It's also worth noting that Charles Frazier, best-selling author and western North Carolina native, earlier this year received an \$8 million advance and \$3 million film deal—the largest advance ever paid for a work of fiction—for a follow-up to his New York Times Best-Seller *Cold Mountain*. Frazier's first book and current project are both works of historical fiction based in the North Carolina mountains.

This demonstrates the interest our region and its culture today receive, but why? World travelers, tourists, consumers, governments, scholars, historians and our own citizenry recognize, embrace and guard our rich heritage, its products, and its origins—the mountains themselves. A Natural Heritage Area Designation would further enhance our ability to protect, preserve and promote the heritage and culture that marks our region as a national treasure. Indeed, I believe that a National Heritage Area Designation is needed to ensure perpetually that the national and international attention our heritage already receives makes our region strong, and does not endanger this same heritage and its origins.

The mountains of North Carolina are among the oldest mountains on Earth and have played a prominent role in shaping the people, plants, and animals living in the region since long before the first colonial settlers arrived in our great nation. The unique range of plant and animal life reflects the most biologically diverse temperate-climate environment on the planet. The terrain boasts some of the highest mountains and the deepest gorge east of the Mississippi River.

Unique among the original colonies, the *land* of western North Carolina – its bounty and its barriers – has been the single most defining factor in the colonization of the mountains and the creation of our mountain heritage and culture.

Our unique geography has shaped the patterns of human activity in this region by creating a culture having grown in isolation for many years. The culture of the region is rich in the traditions of "handmade" crafts, unique mountain music and dance, mountain folklore and storytelling - all shaped by the influence of the native Cherokee and Scotch-Irish settlers.

Through it all, the mountains have promised hope and opportunity for those who would make the journey. The natives who first settled here, Spanish explorers in search of gold, and Europeans fleeing tyranny and famine, all had their hopes fulfilled by this enchanted land. Even early American entrepreneurs found their

fortunes in the virgin timber and precious minerals.

Centuries before Europeans landed on the continent, the Cherokee Indians had developed an advanced early civilization in this region. Much of what went into creating the distinctive mix of arts and crafts, music and dance, language and lore that makes up our mountain culture was influenced by the Cherokees and based on their own accomplishments.

Since the mid-16th century, Spaniards, French, British, Africans, and Scandinavians have lived in the mountains, but it was the influence of the Scotch-Irish that gave our cultural heritage much of the unique character it has today. Once in America, many of the Scotch-Irish traveled south through the Cumberland Gap, and ended up in the mountains of North Carolina, where they combined their European traditions with traditions they discovered among the Cherokee.

The language, religion, arts, crafts, and music of the Scotch-Irish all proved to be lasting influences on the mountain culture. Settlers who followed added texture to the cultural heritage of the region and brought a renewed appreciation of its natural resources. What has emerged over the centuries is an intricate and exciting legacy that all of America deserves to learn about and enjoy.

With its bounty of natural and cultural treasures, western North Carolina is a prime candidate for U.S Park Service designation as a National Heritage Area. The region has a number of natural and cultural heritage sites that are already recognized as being of national significance, including the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, Mount Mitchell, Grandfather Mountain, Whiteside Mountain, Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, Linville Gorge Wilderness, the New River, the Nantahala River, Roan Mountain, and Fontana Lake - just to name a few. The people, organizations, and government entities in the region have already taken important steps and made significant accomplishments to preserve natural and cultural heritage – building a solid foundation for making significant advances as a National Heritage Area.

These individuals and groups have established productive, partnering relationships over the past decade and developed state, local, and private funding sources to match federal dollars. The partners have identified clear and achievable objectives for preserving the region's natural and cultural heritage. They have specified a professional and responsible management group, outlined workable business plans, and established a working timeline for their projects. Thus, the region stands poised to realize its goal of establishing a unique heritage identity to encourage others to enjoy its resources and learn about this important part of the fabric of a greater American natural and cultural heritage.

Receiving official designation as a National Heritage Area would do much to help the people of Western North Carolina realize this noble goal – something that would benefit Americans everywhere.

Mr. Chairman, we respectfully thank you and members of this committee for the support you have already demonstrated during this hearing, and stand ready to assist you in any way during this process.

Thank you.

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